

AREA 52: ARRIVAL

November 1952

Ron's mates back home would be down the pub, chasing the girls and blowing their week's wages on beer, while Norm, Malcolm and Phil from basic training would be sunning themselves in Malaya, Korea and Tripoli. After he came down with chicken-pox in training, they'd been sent gallivanting abroad while he recuperated in quarantine. And where was he now? Ass-End, Yorkshire in the snow. He didn't need National Service for that, he could just have found a job on a farm.

The bloody army were supposed to have picked him up from the station, but they couldn't even organize that. So, after waiting three hours, he was trudging along a snow-covered dirt track and hoping that the directions the station-master gave him lead the right place. His boots had rubbed his heels raw, his hands were freezing, and his shoulders ached from carrying his kit-bag. He could only feel his toes because the heat generated by walking for miles over the moors had kept them warm.

His mother had told him he should volunteer for the Navy instead of waiting to be called up. For the first time he wished he'd listened to her, as at least he might have ended up in Tahiti or Weymouth. The most exotic place the army had sent him so far was a tent in the Lake District.

Since passing the pub at the edge of the village, he had only seen a couple of drunks and some shivering sheep. The thick clouds above blocked out everything but a few stars peeking through the gaps, and they didn't provide enough light to see much.

Pretty soon, he was going to have to turn around and find somewhere to sleep. If the station-master was having a laugh and he ended up spending the night in a barn he was going to go back there and teach him some manners.

Finally, he spotted a tin sign propped up at the side of the track. As he trudged toward it he tried to read the words in the dim light. Then he wished he hadn't.

Danger, unexploded bombs.

He stopped by the sign and looked up the track. He didn't mind watching out for unexploded bombs in the day, but he could tread on one in a snowy night and not even realize until he was a hundred yards up in the air, with no legs.

Though that couldn't be much worse than two more years in the army.

“Halt, who goes there?”

Ron peered into the darkness ahead. He could just make out a sign on a fence proclaiming it belonged to *No. 7 Sanitation Squadron*. A man-like shape stepped out in front of him and stood beside what looked like a wooden sentry box.

“1666 Private Durston, reporting for duty.”

“Step forward and be recognized.”

Ron stepped slowly toward the man, trying not to cause any undue alarm. Then a light shone into his eyes, and Ron raised his hands to block it out.

“Hands up!” the man said. Ron raised them above his head and blinked against the bright light.

“Can you stop pointing that in my face, you silly sod?”

The light moved down to Ron's chest. He looked at the man, who held a torch in one hand and a rifle in the other, and wore a private's uniform.

“What are you doing here?” the guard said.

“You were supposed to pick me up from the station, I’ve been walking for three hours and my feet hurt like buggery and I just want to sit down and take a dump.”

The guard stepped back toward the sentry box. “No-one goes in or out between seven and seven. Come back in the morning.”

A girl walked past, holding a large pot by a handle in each hand. Steam rose from it in the cold air.

“Hello,” she said.

She strode past the guard.

“You let her in.”

The guard’s eyes narrowed and he stared at Ron. “Are you making fun of me? Or is this some sick communist mind control? You want to make me think I’m crazy, so I let you in?”

Ron twisted his hand at the wrist so he could point at the girl without lowering his arms. He opened his mouth to speak as he looked past the guard, but could no longer see any sign of her. Where could she have gone? He peered through the gate. Beyond were several wooden buildings with dimly-lit windows and a row of battered Nissen huts, some of them covered with a thick layer of soil.

“She was here just a second ago.”

“They’ve warned us about people like you.”

“Come on, mate. It’s late and I’ve been walking for hours. and on the train before that. I just want to report and get a good kip.”

The guard held the rifle at his hip and pointed it at Ron. “The Captain is very insistent.”

“Careful where you point that thing.”

“If you don’t come any closer, I won’t have to shoot you. Because I will if I have to. I have orders.”

Ron turned his head and looked into the darkness behind him. “So where am I supposed to sleep?”

The guard shrugged, then motioned past Ron with his rifle. “There’s a barn over past the fence. But I’ll be keeping an eye on you.”

“Or the pub in the village,” the girl’s voice said. Ron leaned to the side and looked past the guard again, but could still see no sign of her in the darkness.

The landlord held up his hands as Ron opened the pub door and stepped inside. “Eh, war’s over, mate.”

“Ha ha, very funny,” Ron said, and felt warmth against his face as he closed the door against the freezing winter air. An old man with a pipe sat at a table in a cloud of smoke, nursing a glass of beer, but otherwise the pub was empty.

A fire roared in the fireplace, and Ron strode toward it. He leaned his bag against the wall and held his hands in front of the flames. His fingers tingled as they warmed.

“You’re not looking for Jerries, then?” the landlord said.

Ron looked at him. “I got called up. Just finished training and God knows why they sent me here.”

The old man put down his pipe and nodded. “It’ll make a man of you, son. I never regretted my time in the war. Best years of my life.”

From the grey hair and wrinkles Ron could tell he wasn’t talking about the last war.

“Beat off Napoleon single-handed,” the landlord said.

“The Kaiser. We taught him not to mess with us.” The old man leaned closer to Ron. “You should have seen what the girls did when they saw us in uniform.” He smiled, spreading more wrinkles across his face.

“So what are you doing here?” the landlord said.

Ron held his hands over his ears, hoping that would warm them. Instead they felt colder than before. “I was supposed to report for duty today, but they forgot to meet me at the station. Now they won’t let me in until morning.”

The landlord placed a glass on the bar. “You’ve got time for a pint, then.”

Ron nodded. “Bitter, please. This girl said you could put me up for the night.”

“What girl?” the old man said.

“I don’t know. She walked past and disappeared, then said I should come here.”

The landlord placed the glass beneath a tap and pulled the handle, then nodded toward the stairs. “We’ve got a couple of rooms upstairs. Nothing fancy, mind.”

Ron smiled. “So long as it’s fancier than a barn, I’ll be happy.”

“What’s your name, son?” the old man said.

“Ron. 226181666 Private Durston.”

The old man saluted. “Lance Corporal Stone.” He nodded toward the landlord. “And that’s Sergeant Hague.”

“Why’s this place called Ass End?”

Hague finished pouring the beer, lifted the glass and put it on the bar. “It’s the end of the River Ass. Nothing fancy.”

“There’s a River Ass?”

“Well, it’s more of a stream, these days.”

“More of a trickle, last I saw,” Stone said. “Not like in my day. We used to swim in it when I was a lad.”

Hague fumbled under the bar until he pulled out a sheet of paper. Ron walked over and took his beer. Hague unfolded a map and spread it out beside the taps.

He ran his finger along a blue line. “Here you are. River Ass.” He tapped an empty green space at the end of the line. “We’re here.” He pointed at a nearby black line crossing the river. “The station is here.”

“You have a station? Then why did I just walk three hours from where they dropped me off?”

“Special stop for the army,” Hague said. “Not on any timetables. That lot are over here.” He tapped a blank green spot on the map, then waved his hand around the area. “Then most of this is farms.”

“Why isn’t the village on the map?”

Hague shrugged. “In the war, they took us off because of the army base. Didn’t want Jerry finding it just by following a map. Never seem to have got around to putting us back.”

“It’s not so bad,” Stone said. “It keeps the grockles away. I likes my peace and quiet.”

Ron sipped the beer and sighed. After freezing his nuts off for hours in the snow, that felt good.

“What do they do there anyway? Seems like a lot of fuss about a few huts and some cleaners.”

Hague leaned toward him. “Son, what’s the first thing they teach you in the army?”

“No wanking in the billet?”

“No, the other thing.”

“Oh, loose lips.”

“Now that reminds me of those French girls,” Stone said. He pouted and tapped his lips together.

The next morning, Ron stood outside the CO’s office in the camp, listening to the conversation inside. He was surprised to find the same guard on duty when he returned at nine, though at least he didn’t have to explain himself a second time. He’d thought about getting up early to be there at seven, but after the previous night he just couldn’t be arsed.

“All right, private,” another voice said. “Send him in.”

“I think he’s a commie, sir. He was using mind control last night. A lesser man might have fallen for it.”

“Thank you, private. I shall bear that in mind.”

The guard stepped out of the door, and glared at Ron. “Captain Smethurst wants to see you.”

Ron took a step forward. The guard put his hand on Ron’s chest.

“If you are a commie, I will shoot you. Remember that. I have my orders.”

Ron nodded. The guard stepped out of the way and Ron stepped past him into the office. An officer whose uniform looked like had he never spent hours trudging through mud and snow sat at the desk inside, leaning over some paperwork.

He looked up and Ron saluted.

“1666 Private Durston, sir.” Ron pulled his paperwork from his jacket and held it out. “I have orders to report here.”

“For what, private?”

“I assumed you would know that, sir.”

Smethurst took the papers and put on a pair of spectacles, then flipped through them. He looked up at Ron.

“Not really the army type, are you private?”

“National Service, sir.”

Smethurst leaned back, sighed, and removed his glasses. “I asked for a replacement for Morgan. Why in God’s name would they send me a National Serviceman?”

“I’ve been asking myself the same thing, sir. I’d hoped to go abroad. See a bit of the world.”

“Then why didn’t you join the Navy?”

“That’s what my mother said, sir. But I get sea-sick, sir.”

Smethurst shook his head. “I knew men like you in Burma. Lolligagging, fraternizing with the native girls, all looking for a medal without having to work for it. Just wanted to go back to their mummy with a few tales to help them get their leg over the girl next door.”

Ron nodded. “Yes, sir.”

Some foreign travel, a medal for surviving the trip without getting sunburned, plenty of fraternizing with the natives, and not being shot or stabbed was precisely what he wanted from National Service.

Smethurst flipped through the papers again.

“You’re late, private.” He looked up at Ron. “You were supposed to report yesterday.”

“I did, sir. But the guard wouldn’t let me in.”

“That makes you absent without leave, private. I could have you in front of a court-martial.”

“Please do, sir.”

“Are you pulling my leg, private?”

“No, sir. I’d rather be in detention than stuck out here.”

Smethurst sat back and thought for a moment. Hopefully, he was thinking of sending him to a cozy, warm cell.

“Report to Sergeant Wilson. I’m putting you on guard duty all week. That should calm you down.”